

The Book of ISAIAH – Chapters 40-55

Catholic Scripture Study

Memory Verse: Isaiah 40:1-3

*Comfort, comfort my people,
Says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
And cry to her that her warfare is ended,
That her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.*

Week 20 - The Consolation of Israel

I. REVIEW

“Of all the books in the Old Testament (OT), Isaiah is perhaps the richest. Its literary grandeur is unequaled. Its scope is unparalleled. The breadth of its view of God is unmatched.

Thus it is no wonder that Isaiah is the most quoted prophet in the New Testament (NT), and along with the Psalms and Deuteronomy, one of the most frequently cited of all OT books.

“To read the book with the open eyes of the spirit is to see oneself, at times all too clearly, but also to see a God whose holiness is made irresistible by his love” (*John N. Oswalt - The Book of Isaiah Chapters 1-39 pg 3*).

As we study the book of the Prophet Isaiah – the greatest of all the **classical** OT prophets - it is helpful to keep in mind that the OT was completed long before the time of Jesus.

- It was (and still is) the sole Bible of the Jews, God's first people, before it became part of the Christian Bible.

Jesus Himself was raised on the OT. He based his whole ministry on what it says, and he approached his death with its words on his lips (Psalm 22).

Read reverently and prayerfully the Old Testament can become a living and relevant force in our everyday lives.

II. TRANSITION AND CHANGE (ISAIAH 40-55)

A. Overview

Isaiah chapters 40-55 make up the second part of the book of Isaiah, also known as "Second Isaiah" or "Deutero-Isaiah," and comprise the section called the "Book of Consolation of Israel." ("Deutero" is the Greek word for "second.")

The earlier chapters of Isaiah (1-39) spoke of judgment and condemnation to the proud, unfaithful, rebellious inhabitants of Jerusalem.

- But now the tone shifts from criticism and denunciation to consolation.

Why consolation now? What has changed in Isaiah's prophetic vision of Israel?

Israel had been exiled to Babylon, an exile which lasted from 597-538 BC (approximately 60 years).

These chapters speak God's Word to the Jews in exile in Babylon some 150 years after Isaiah's prophecy.

It was a terrible time for the exiled believers in Yahweh:

- Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed;

- The Davidic dynasty had ended;
- The priesthood had stopped functioning;
- The ruined land was under foreign domination.

Judging from all appearances, Yahweh had ceased acting for his people. But the first words of chapter 40 announce the main theme of the Book of Consolation: the comfort (encouragement) of the exiles.

- God has not forgotten His people. In the midst of sin there is forgiveness; in the desert, hope.

The sufferings of God's people in Babylon, foretold in the previous chapter (39:6-7), are over and, what is more important, they can be explained as divine punishment so there's no question of God having forgotten his people.

A. Purpose of the Prophet

Isaiah's purpose now is to console, encourage, and inspire the disillusioned and faint hearted exiles, who saw no hope of returning to Jerusalem.

In their discouragement, they were in danger of being won over to the morals and idolatry of Babylon.

Jerusalem had been destroyed, but Israel hopes for restoration. And the Lord promises that Jerusalem will be restored:

***'She shall be inhabited,'
and of the cities of Judah, 'They shall be built,
and I will raise up their ruins' . . .***

***saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built,'
and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.'"***

The prophet addressed these discouraged exiles, who were wavering between putting their trust in God and abandoning hope. To encourage and inspire them Isaiah stressed God's love and power.

He predicts the triumph of Cyrus of Persia over Babylon, under whom the Jews will be permitted to return home.

Historical Note: The events prophesied in chapters 40-55 probably occurred around 539 BC towards the end of the exile. Cyrus, the Persian king mentioned in this book, defeated the Babylonians in 539 BC. His decree in 538 BC allowing the Jews to return home from exile is not mentioned in this book.

III. PROMISE OF SALVATION (ISAIAH 40:1-11)

A. Introduction

The oracles in this section are addressed to the people of Jerusalem who have been deported or exiled to Babylon.

Those years of suffering and exile have more than atoned for their sins. The time has come for them, with the Lord's help, to set out on the return journey from Babylon to Jerusalem.

When one turns from the 39th to the 40th chapter of Isaiah it is as though stepping out of the darkness of judgment into the light of salvation.

- The contrast is great, and yet it is evident that chapter 39 is a preparation for 40.

In chapter 39 Isaiah predicts tragically that the days are coming when the Jews will be carried off to Babylon in captivity.

The following chapters (40-55) serve to provide hope and light to dispel the dark and seemingly hopeless picture of chapter 39.

They depict the people of God in human bondage, yet this physical bondage is but a symbol of the far deeper spiritual bondage of the people – their bondage to the sin.

From this bondage there is going to be a deliverer, the **Servant of the Lord**. As they face the future the people are assured that God will be with them in the trials and tribulations of their existence.

B. The Servant Songs

In the prophetic poetry of Isaiah Part Two (Second Isaiah), there are four compositions known as the “Servant Songs” or “Canticles of the Servant of Yahweh.”

Two key questions arise with regard to the Servant Songs:

- Who is this mysterious servant?
- Is there one servant or more than one servant?

We will study the Servant Songs one-by-one, and ask what message they hold for us in the context of the entire Book of Isaiah, and in relation to the New Testament.

But first we will look at the opening verses of Isaiah 40 to highlight the transition between Part I and Part II.

IV. COMFORT MY PEOPLE (40: 1-2)

Chapter 40 begins with God’s command to comfort his suffering and despairing people.

The command appears to be addressed to a group of prophets, probably with Isaiah particularly in mind, for it is he who actually brings the comfort of the announcement of salvation.

- Isaiah is saying, “Your God has commanded us to comfort you.”

Read: Isaiah 40:1-2

**[1] Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.
[2] Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.**

“Comfort my people:” The people belong to God, for he has chosen them. Hence, even though they may forsake him, he will not abandon them.

Nevertheless, it was necessary to punish them through the judgment of the Exile, for Israel must learn humility. But even in their suffering and exile, God does not forsake his own people.

A. True Comfort

As the subsequent chapters show, true comfort consists in speaking the entire truth concerning the peoples' tragic condition and in causing them to see God as their only hope.

Political correctness is a curse because it buries the truth in a false charity – it is the sign of the false prophet. It is only when the enormity of sin is faced and acknowledged, that the announcement of deliverance may be made.

B. Proclaim God's Comfort (40:2)

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem . . . Jerusalem here is not seen as merely a city, but as a people in sorrow, the chosen people in exile.

That she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins does not mean an excessive measure of God's wrath and anger. The purification process that the punishment of exile has brought about is now complete. The full measure of mortification

has been met. The sins of Israel have been forgiven and the atonement has been fulfilled.

Verse 2 states that God's comfort is to be **proclaimed** boldly to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that there is no uncertainty in the message.

Isaiah and the other prophets are to speak, for it is by proclaiming God's truth that comfort is brought to those who are in need of it.

- It is in God's wondrous forgiveness and his plan of redemption that we find the basis and reason for this message of consolation.

The comfort consists in speaking words that will touch the heart with pleasure, comfort, and refreshment, to encourage and cheer the heart like gentle rain falling upon the ground. It consists of three parts:

- ***that her warfare is ended,***
- ***that her iniquity is pardoned,***
- ***that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.***

On the spiritual level, Jerusalem represents the Church, the elect of God.

Her warfare is ended . . . There will no longer be any warfare for her. Her hardship and misery are over. The period of time in which Israel must suffer has come to an end.

This period of suffering is not limited to the Babylonian Exile. What Isaiah refers to is a long period of bondage and misery brought on the nation by its sin and apostasy, and culminating in the period of wrath and indignation known as the exile.

The iniquity of Jerusalem has been pardoned . . . Not only is the period of misery completed and her sins forgiven but, furthermore, God regards the nation as having suffered sufficiently.

She has received . . . double for all her sins. From the Lord's hand Jerusalem has received the cup of wrath which has been poured out. Now, from the same hand she has received double blessing.

Note: the word **double** can indicate either double punishment and suffering or double blessing and mercy received from the Lord. Blessing seems more appropriate in this context.

V. PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD (40:3-5)

A. Overview

The theme of this section is the triumphant procession of God back to Jerusalem after his victory over the enemy, when his royal glory will be revealed and the laws of nature suspended.

The figurative language here describes the actual return of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem. It is the Lord who leads them and makes the road easy for them. It is he who will **“lift up the valleys and make the mountains and hills low.”**

That journey is mentioned throughout this section. The voice speaking in the name of the Lord boosts their morale: it won't be a difficult journey; they will find a way opened up for them which will bring them to the glory of the Lord.

The words spoken by the mysterious voice, inviting them to set out, fills the returnees with hope.

B. Repentance

But there is a deeper meaning to the return journey. It is a return of the people to God from their unfaithfulness and apostasy.

Matthew 3:3 (see also Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4; John 1:23) sees in these verses a prophecy of John the Baptist and the Messiah.

The people are to prepare the way for the Lord, and this they are to do by means of repentance. It was their iniquity that had kept God from them and had brought about the bondage of Babylon and the end of the theocracy.

Read: Isaiah 40:3-5

[3] A voice cries:

***"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.***

***[4] Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.***

***[5] And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."***

C. In the Wilderness (40:3)

The wilderness scene recalls the exodus from Egypt when God brought his people through the wilderness of the desert on their way to the Promised Land.

As in the exodus from Egypt, on the "way" from Babylon to Jerusalem they will see wonderful evidence of the power of God.

In their spiritual journey, the Lord will come to his people again, but *they* must prepare the way. The desert (or wilderness) is therefore a figure of all the obstacles and impediments as well as the difficulties and have kept God from his people.

As in times past he had come through the desert to their aid, so will he this time.

D. The Herald's Voice

A mysterious voice cries out:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." (Isaiah 40:3).

The voice is not the voice of God or of an angel; it is the voice of a human being, a messenger of God declaring his commands.

The four Gospels see these words fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist, who is the voice crying in the wilderness: ***"prepare the way of the Lord."***

And, indeed, John, with his call to personal conversion and his baptism of repentance, does prepare the way for the people to find Jesus (Mt 3:3); (Mk 1:3); (Lk 3:4); John (1:23), whom the Gospels confess to be "the Lord" (v.3).

- John the Baptist is his herald or messenger, the "precursor:"

*"The voice commands that a **way** be opened for the Word of God, the path smoothed and all obstacles removed: when our God comes, he will be able to walk without hindrance."*

"Prepare the way of the Lord: this means to preach the Gospel and offer consolation to his people, with a desire that the salvation of God embrace all mankind" (Eusebius of Caesarea; Commentary on Isaiah).

To this voice all men must give ear and listen. Jesus declares that he is the way! Early Christianity was also called "The Way."

In Isaiah's language there's a strange mystery as the speaker is kept in the background and only his magnificent message sounds forth.

(This recalls John the Baptist's statement "He must increase, but I must decrease).

Nevertheless, it is an effective voice, as though resounding over all the country where God's people are.

E. The Glory of the Lord (40:5)

When the way has been fully prepared, then the glory of the Lord will be revealed in his appearance among men; and this glory will be universally witnessed. It will be made plain for all to see, for it has long been hidden.

With the destruction of the Temple under Nebuchadnezzar the glory would depart from Jerusalem, and the theocracy would come to an end. No longer would Jerusalem be the holy city, for the people's sins would keep their God from them.

Now, however, there is to be a full reversal of the situation. God will again appear among men. This time, however, it will be an eschatological coming, a revelation of the Glory of God that will display itself in his salvation.

In all the majesty of his power and grace God will be manifested to his people. This revelation will not take place in a corner but will be seen by all men.

It is true that a man will die if he sees God, for man is sinful. Yet, with the revelation of God's glory, a strange thing happens. He that is flesh, indeed all that are flesh, do what they supposedly cannot do.

They see God, and they live!

When “The Word Made Flesh,” Jesus Christ, was on earth he said, **“He that has seen me has seen the Father.”** It is of interest to note that Isaiah does not speak of all men, but of all flesh.

VI. THE ENDURING WORD OF GOD (40: 6-8)

A. Overview

The main theme of this section is that man is frail like the grass and only the word of the Lord endures forever.

Isaiah is speaking, however, not merely of the frailty of human existence. His thought penetrates as well to the inner life of man. The mind with all its qualities and attributes, as well as the spiritual life, is included in the prophet's thought.

He then compares the weakness and brevity of human life to the enduring word of God. To God's word there is a permanent character. Unlike the flesh of man, which withers and fades, it stands for ever.

Read: Isaiah 40:6-8

[6] A voice says, "Cry!"

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

All flesh is grass,

and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

[7] The grass withers, the flower fades,

when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;

surely the people is grass.

[8] The grass withers, the flower fades;

but the word of our God will stand for ever.

B. The Permanence of God's Word.

An unknown voice asks the prophet to speak in the name of the Lord (vv. 6-8).

The command to **“Cry!”** is addressed to the prophet himself. He is to cry that ***all flesh is grass***, etc. He is also to proclaim the imperishable nature of the Word of God.

We all know that grass and flowers wither and die. In this case the cause of the grass withering and the flowers fading is ***the breath of the LORD***. Isaiah says that what is true of the grass and flowers is also true of the people.

Although the people have withered and fallen like dried grass, God's word as spoken by his prophet will not fail. Just as he had said that judgment would come, and it had, so he now says restoration will come, and it will!

The text shows the vivid contrast between the permanence of God's word and the transitory nature of human beings.

VII. THE COMING OF THE LORD GOD (40:9-11)

A. Overview

Verses 9-11 contain some exceptionally beautiful, tender imagery, typical of (Second) Isaiah and conceivable only in conjunction with great strength and tenderness (v. 10). Only someone with great mental and emotional maturity can show such gentleness.

In these verses we find the beautiful image of the Good Shepherd, sensitive to the needs of his sheep, feeding them, lifting up the lambs in his arms and giving special protection to the ewes (v.11).

Read: Isaiah 40:9-11

***[9] Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,***

**lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Behold your God!"**
**[10] Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.**
**[11] He will feed his flock like a shepherd,
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.**

B. The Good News (40:9)

Zion (Jerusalem) is the messenger of good tidings. She is not merely a recipient of God's grace but also a messenger of that grace to the surrounding world.

The announcement of God's presence must be proclaimed far and wide so that all will know of it – hence the command to go up, not merely to a mountain, but to a high mountain.

The good news is about the intervention of God in the world:
"Behold your God!" "Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might"

The Creator breaks into his world, both to break the power of evil with his strong **"arm"** (40:10) and, **"like a shepherd"** to gather up the broken in his gentle **"arms."**

The phrase **"fear not"** characteristically announces the appearance of God and the end of a period of anxious waiting. This was how the angels addressed Mary (Luke 1:30) and the shepherds (Luke 2:10); it runs like a golden thread through these chapters too.

Zion and Jerusalem are identified as the messengers of peace who announce the coming of the Lord. They are personified as proclaimers of the truth. This is in keeping with the thought of

Isaiah 2:3: ***“For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.”***

C. Application

It is the duty of the Church to declare the whole word of God, and whenever God comes to his people, it is Zion and Jerusalem that must proclaim that fact.

This particular coming is eschatological; it is a coming that will bring salvation to his people; it is a message worthy of the most powerful and dignified proclamation, and this proclamation lies in the hands of the Church.

The messenger is to be bold; he is to raise his voice that all may hear. The Church is not to keep this message to herself but is to present it with a holy boldness.

She's not to pose as a seeker after truth, unsure of her message, but to declare it in clear, firm, and positive voice that her message is true.

- She must be vigorously and militantly evangelistic.
- Hesitation, timorousness, and trembling are out of place.

There is no need to fear as though the word of God would not be fulfilled, or as though the message would prove to be untrue and embarrassment would result.

The importance of the message can be summed up briefly:

If we have not God, we have nothing: and if we have Him, we have all things!

D. The Good Shepherd (40:11)

When the Lord comes he will come as the Strong One and will be a Shepherd to his own. He will provide all the tender care and sacrifice that the shepherd gives to his sheep.

He's not like the hireling, who flees in time of danger (see John 10:12). Whatever the shepherd must do for his sheep, the Lord will do for his own, for he is the Good Shepherd.

The Lord possesses a flock, and to this flock he exercises the office of Shepherd. His flock consists of sheep, that is, those who are tender and humble and of sheep-like nature.

In the language of the New Testament we may say that his flock is his elect, those whom before the foundation of the world he had chosen to save and who in the course of time have received the tender grace of the shepherd, manifested in the salvation of their souls and the constant nourishing and cherishing of them throughout their lives.

They are not the strong and powerful, as the world apart from God regards strength and power, but those who without the shepherd would perish.

When they are in the shepherd's arm, nothing can harm or come near to separate them from him. Those whom he gathers are described as lambs, i.e., the young lambs recently born. They are the weakest members of the flock.

They cannot possibly defend themselves against attack and are in need of the shepherd's constant protection.

By means of his strong arm he will gather them up, and in his bosom he will carry them so that they will recline in his arm against his bosom. Thus they will not have to walk themselves nor stumble nor go astray.

As for the ewes nursing the young lambs, these the shepherd does not drive, but leads. These ewes need particular care; they cannot be forced along by driving, and so the shepherd tenderly leads them.

Up to this time, God's people had received double at the Lord's hand for their sins; now they find that the Lord is a tender shepherd to them.

VIII. SUMMARY/APPLICATION

A. The Emptiness of Materialism

The Jews had forgotten the promises of God. They fell into materialism and secularism – just like us today. For their unfaithfulness and apostasy, they suffered the judgment of exile.

We too, as a society, country, Church, world, will suffer judgment if we do not return to God.

The Jews in captivity were much like the people of today. They did not believe there was any way God could transform them or their circumstances. They insisted on their freedom to personally do as they wished while all the time believing that their situation could never really be changed.

B. Hope

It is into a situation just like ours that Isaiah speaks by inspiration. He speaks to a people who have lost hope. The impossible has happened.

- They were sure their nation could not fall,
- That their Temple could not be destroyed, and
- That their God would not let them down.

Yet all this happened! Whatever the future might hold, it would always be one of regret.

Yes, they reason, God may have acted in the past, for other people, but this situation is beyond him: it is beyond his compassion, and it is beyond his power.

Isaiah says to us as he says to them, **“No!”**

There's nothing beyond his compassion or his power. Have you not known? Have you not heard? There's nothing that a caring Creator cannot change. We are persons of worth to him, and that means that we really can choose to be and act differently than we have.

Are we bound by chains of sin, are we captives of sin as real as any captivity the Judeans endured? Of course we are. But the Creator can break those chains.

To be sure, the way he chooses to do so is his business. One of the recurring themes in the following chapters is the discomfort the people have with the way God chooses to act on their behalf.

- We cannot dictate the terms or the means but we can hold onto him with confident hope.

These people needed to hear the word of God in ways that changed how they thought.

This is what we need too!

We need lives of faith that are shaped by the word of God, its view of reality, and the principles that emerge from it.

If I cannot believe in God and hope in him in the sense of surrendering my life to him in a way that pleases him, then his power cannot transform me.

But if I will actively believe his Word, there really are no limits to what he can do for me, for my family, for my society, and for my country.

God's word endures and will never fail. Why put faith in what does not satisfy, what will not endure? Why not trust God and store up eternal treasures?